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# Princeton, LeClaire aspire to 'greatness'

## River communities in the running for state funds 108

By Barb Geerts  
NSP Staff Writer

The smell of fresh popcorn wafted through the air, while signs, special-label water bottles and even cookies sported the catch-phrase of the day.

This was "The Place" to be.

Officials from Princeton and LeClaire pulled out all the stops in welcoming a panel of judges on Sept. 22, hoping to become a winning community in the Iowa Great Places campaign.

The two Mississippi river towns decided to band together for the promotion, since city leaders already work collaboratively on a number of programs. They chose as their slogan, "The Place," an acronym for Treasuring History & Environment in Princeton & LeClaire Through Arts & Cultural Entertainment.

Quite a mouthful, but "The Place" showed the judges it had plenty to offer, as community boosters presented a DVD highlighting the area's natural beauty, cultural enrichment programs and historical importance. The virtual tour was followed by a "drive by" of some of the area's points of interest, including the historic stone school, the windmill barn, and, of course, the river.

Princeton has been referred to by locals as "the best-kept secret in Scott County." But after last Thursday's presentation, they're hoping the quaint river town will be a secret no longer, but rather singled out as one of the state's must-see jewels.

The Iowa Great Places program, launched by Gov. Tom Vilsack, will provide enhanced funding for community development in three selected cities in the state, according to Bob Blaze, a member of a committee working to promote Princeton and LeClaire.

The Iowa Great Places Web site says the initiative is designed to cultivate an area's special qualities through a partnership between state and local officials. Participation in the program provides communities with a "coaching team" and "one-stop shopping" for state programs to help them achieve their vision for a better place to live. There's the added bonus of statewide publicity for the three "pilot sites" being selected.

Competition is fierce: There were 148 communities vying for the honor initially, according to city officials.

Keith Youngers, the mayor of Princeton, said he would like the city to be recognized as

a "Great Place" because the state partnership would be beneficial for the town.

"With the (Lost Grove) Lake coming in, we would like to see Princeton expand somewhat, and hopefully this money would help get that area ready," he said.

He said a portion of the funds would be used for further renovation of Boll's Community Center, a historic building that once housed a grocery store and dance hall. The first floor restoration is completed, but the upper-floor hall still needs work. Future plans call for an elevator and more exterior work, as well.

City leaders also would like to see decorative lighting and flower baskets added to the downtown areas.

Youngers emphasized that the area has already seen several major improvements, making it more attractive to residents and tourists alike. "The Corps of Engineers has spent a ton of money on the Princeton Beach and the Wildlife Refuge," he noted.

Rick Reed, president of the LeClaire Chamber of Commerce, told the judges the area has been experiencing "explosive growth," with many new housing divisions going up.

"The LeClaire Chamber has almost doubled in the last year. We have 120 businesses," he said. "There's a real growth pattern in these two small towns, and it's benefiting from the Quad Cities as a whole."

Committee members touted the small-town atmosphere of both Princeton and LeClaire, and the multitude of amenities and activities that provide homespun fun for residents. Some of those include the annual LeClaire Tugfest, the Princeton Days festival, the "Making Waves" art workshops, the Buffalo Bill Cody Museum, the Mississippi Valley Welcome Center, and one of the Mississippi's best gathering spots for boaters, Princeton beach — to name just a few.

Take in the surrounding Quad-Cities area, and you add many more popular destinations, such as the Dan Nagle Walnut Grove Pioneer Village, the Figge Art Museum, riverboat gambling, entertainment at The Mark, bike trails and numerous golf courses.

The video specifically discussed seven dimensions of "The Place." They are: 1) a unique sense of place; 2) engaging experiences; 3) a rich social fabric; 4) a vital economy; 5) a pleasing environment; 6) a strong foundation; and 7) a creative culture.

Youngers said the committee members — all sporting "The Place" T-shirts for the event — worked hard to put the promotional piece together. And he hopes that when state officials make their decision Oct. 1, they will agree that "The Place" is a "Great Place."





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Sporting T-shirts touting "The Place," volunteers serve the judges refreshments before presenting a video showcasing the area.

NSP Photos by Barb Geerts



Penne Miller of Princeton places a sign welcoming the contingent from the "Iowa Great Places" initiative to town.

